

Research Statement

The seeds of my research interests were planted long ago, during Army Ranger training, when I spent two weeks conducting mock missions in the swamps of the Florida Everglades. Boom! there I was: 0300 hours, neck-deep in the swamp, glad that my chattering teeth drowned out the throaty rumble of the nearby alligators, witnessing a phenomenon that would later become all too familiar in my work experience.

The purpose of these training exercises was to teach small-unit leadership. Every day, a different student would be in charge of each of the squads in the patrol. On this night, I watched the performances of two very different squad leaders. Both were highly intelligent, but their similarities ended there. One of them was a poster-boy for the military: tall, athletic, and naturally commanding. The other was quiet and small; assessment tests hadn't shown him to have particularly strong leadership potential.

Each man had ten soldiers under his command, every one of them exhausted and soaking wet, operating on four hours of sleep and one meal a day. Under those pressures, the "natural leader" no longer filled the bill for some reason. Instead, his squad members turned to the quiet patrol leader for guidance. This man seemed to thrive in the face of adversity. The extra responsibility of leadership – of caring for his team members and not just himself – seemed to energize him. It was as though the burden of leadership somehow brought out the best in him, and the rest of the Ranger students recognized this.

Standing there in the chilly water, I was fascinated by the contrast between the two men – and how the army's assessment system had, in a way, failed them both. The first had been predicted to be an ideal leader, and may well have ended up in charge of a combat unit; the other's leadership potential had been missed, but it became apparent when the going got tough.

I asked myself: what was it about the quiet patrol leader that drew others to him? It was obviously an issue that went far beyond the military. How do people decide who they are willing to follow? How do teams work in dynamic situations?

I explore these issues by conducting research in organizational behavior. I believe that trait-based theories of leadership simply don't hold up in context, and I look at the group rather than the leader to study these phenomena. Importantly, I come to the study of leadership and teams from a distinct perspective: the swamp. My field leadership training and front-line management experience have shown me firsthand the connections between leadership evaluation, group assessment, and actual performance. Just as the small and quiet patrol leader was energized by the chance to lead a squad, I am energized by the prospect of working toward a new understanding of leadership and team dynamics.